

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

For the week of December 15, 1997

Live chat programs are a hot technology for Internet users. "Pop-up messaging" clients such as ICQ and Instant Messenger let you chat with friends, even those who use other online services. How do they work and how can you try them yourself? Read on.

=*=*= POP-UP MESSAGING =*=*=

I've always sort of wondered why CompuServe doesn't include a better mechanism for finding out when friends and associates are online and chatting with them. After all, CompuServe practically invented the chat room (known back in the day of the 300 BPS modem as the "CB Simulator", after citizen's band radio.) Group chat has been available ever since, but a sleek system for chatting privately with another user is lacking from the CIS software.

America Online, on the other hand, has two features that make it simple to find and chat with friends: its Buddy List feature will notify you when friends have logged on. And once a friend is online, AOL's Instant Message feature lets you type a message, which will immediately appear on his screen. Your friend can press "reply" -- and that reply will appear on your screen almost as fast as he can type.

Now, pop-up messaging has come to the Internet. Several programs are available that let you chat in real time with other Net users. CompuServe works with them all: after downloading one, you can chat with friends who use CompuServe, other Internet access providers, even other online services like AOL and Prodigy Internet. When you're using one of these programs, it no longer feels like you're alone when you're online. You know when your friends are logged in and can chat with them, even while you explore CompuServe, surf the web or compose e-mail.

This sort of communication is rather fun and can be useful. It offers more immediacy than electronic mail, but can also be distracting, since messages can (and do) pop up while you're busy with other online tasks. You can leave the program running in the background while you're online. As long as you're online and the client's running, people can chat with you. If you don't want to be bothered, you can just quit the program.

There are several pop-up messaging clients available, each with its own features. Unfortunately, the various pop-up messaging programs are not compatible with each other -- if you use ICQ, for instance, you can't chat with a co-worker that uses Instant Messenger. So you and your associates should probably agree on a single client.

--- ICQ ---

ICQ is among the most popular pop-up messaging clients, and it is easy to see why. Besides the basic features: a list of online friends and messaging function, ICQ makes it easy to search for a particular person. If you don't know any other ICQ users yet, you can search for people who share your interests. If you want to make new friends, you can use the ICQ web page to tell other users about yourself. On the other hand, if you prefer privacy, you can remain invisible to the masses.

The ICQ web page (<http://www.mirabilis.com/>) offers still more features. In fact, it's a tad overwhelming -- there are tutorials, directory assistance servers, funky "web pagers" and mailing lists for power chatters. These additions are nice, but the heart of the beast is the messaging client. ICQ is available for Windows and Mac. The program is currently free. Mirabills has not announced plans to charge for it, but they also haven't said they won't, eventually.

-.-.- AOL Instant Messenger -.-.-

America Online has bundled its Buddy List and Instant Messaging features into a client that non-AOL members can use, called AOL Instant Messenger. It might seem strange for a CompuServe member to use a program from AOL, but it works quite well.

Because Instant Messenger is from AOL, it has the unique ability to communicate with the Instant Message function that's built into America Online. Using Instant Messenger means that you can chat with your AOL-using buddies, and they won't need to install any special software: the tools they need are built into the AOL software.

Before you use Instant Messenger, you need to choose a "screen name" (AOL's version of user identification). Instant Messenger lacks powerful tools for searching for other people, so it's not the best choice for chataholics who want to find new online friends. If, however, you already know the screen names of AOL members or other Instant Messenger users, this program will work just fine. Instant Messenger is free and works with Windows 95, Windows 3.1 and Macintosh. It's available from <http://www.aol.com/aim/home.html>. The program is also bundled with Netscape Communicator version 4.04 for Windows, as "Netscape AOL Instant Messenger."

-.-.- Other Choices -.-.-

More messaging clients are available. There's LiveList, which is still in beta testing and only available for Windows 95 and NT. Yet another choice is PeopleLink, available for Windows and Macintosh. This free client is supported by advertisements that appear in the client window. Finally, there's Ichat Pager, another free client for Windows NT, 95 and Macintosh. These three haven't gained the momentum enjoyed by ICQ and Instant Messenger, but they each do the job nicely in their own way.

Which of these five clients is best? At this point, it's hard to say. If your online buddies already use one or the other, then it makes sense to use whatever they are using. If you want to chat with AOL members, Instant Messenger is the de facto choice. If you want to find new online friends to chat with, you can't go wrong with ICQ.

=*=*= SOFTWARE MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE +*++

AOL Instant Messenger: <http://www.aol.com/aim/home.html>

Ichat: <http://www.ichat.com>

ICQ: <http://www.mirabilis.com>

LiveList: <http://www.livelist.net>

PeopleLink: <http://www.peoplelink.com>

=*=*= THE END =*=*=

The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future newsletter issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com.

How much is that doggy in the window? The one with the waggily tail. How much is that doggy in the window? I do hope that doggy's... copyright 1997 by Kevin Savetz.